

English Abstract

Title : Dissident Debates on Nation-Based Civil Society in Czechoslovakia during the “Normalization” Era

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the theories of *civil society* advanced by dissidents who challenged the Czechoslovak regime under the “normalization” order after 1969, in which *the nation* was conceived as the principal agent of civil society. The paper first examines the possibilities and limitations of Czech and Slovak conceptions of civil society. Although the debates of Czech and Slovak dissidents have generally been treated in separate scholarly contexts, both groups operated within the overarching framework of the Czechoslovak state during normalization and sought to reconstruct civil society through reinterpretations of national history. By highlighting this common ground, the present study employs *civil society* as a shared analytical framework and thereby places these debates into a single comparative horizon. On this basis, the paper then presents a theory of “Czechoslovak civil society” as an attempt to overcome the limits inherent in Czech and Slovak theories of “civil society,” and clarifies both its inclusiveness and its limitations.

Building on this, the paper advances the following hypothesis: namely, that the theory of “Czechoslovak civil society” possessed the potential to encompass all residents of the country, while at the same time unconsciously harboring mechanisms of exclusion.

The Czechoslovak “normalization” regime was established after the failure of the “Prague Spring” of 1968 and the subsequent Soviet-led military intervention. The turning point was the

replacement of Alexander Dubček by Gustáv Husák as First Secretary of the Communist Party. The aim of this regime was to return society to the “normal” state that had existed prior to the Prague Spring. As a result, the everyday lives of citizens were subjected to repression, and the regime did not shrink even from “purging” citizens when it deemed this necessary. The “normalization” regime was characterized by the promulgation of the ideological document *Poučení* (“Lessons”), which officially defined the events of 1968; by “purges” of revisionists, which were particularly harsh on the Czech side; by repression at the hands of the State Security (StB), which forced those regarded as opponents of the regime to emigrate; and by the strengthening of censorship. Under this regime, citizens had no choice but to submit obediently to the system and were compelled to remain silent. At the same time, however, if they did not participate in oppositional movements and continued to live “obediently” within the system, they were guaranteed a certain level of material well-being and everyday life, albeit within what might be called a “second-rate consumer society.”

In this situation, the playwright Václav Havel described the regime as “post-totalitarian,” and perceived those citizens had lost their subjectivity and that both the public and the private spheres had been penetrated by ideology. The “normalization” regime is sometimes understood in such a way that citizens, forbidden to speak freely in the public sphere, withdrew into the private sphere. For Havel and for some of the other dissidents who founded “Charter 77,” however, this understanding of the regime was mistaken. In their view, under the “normalization” regime there no longer existed any public sphere in which citizens could speak out, nor any citizens seeking to defend the private sphere. For dissidents of that time, the “citizens” who might be conceived as the agents of a renewal of the regime no longer existed. From this, it follows that, for some of the signatories of “Charter 77,” “civil society” was defined as a community of “citizens” morally renewed and reconstructed outside the state.

In this period, dissidents sought to discern the contours of the citizen within the history of the nation. At the same time, however, their central concern was precisely the situation in which the regime arbitrarily distorted the history of the nation and suppressed the articulation of any historical perspective that differed from its own.

The historian Jan Křen, a signatory of “Charter 77,” criticized the way in which the regime’s distortion of history produced “blank spots” in history (*bílá místa*). He also pointed out that, as a result, the nation had fallen into spiritual impoverishment and had lost opportunities for self-reflection. A similar critique was advanced by the Slovak Marxist philosopher Miroslav Kusý. By referring to history, both pointed to the possibility of reconstructing a community capable of confronting the regime.

In Czechoslovakia during the “normalization” period, there were, besides Křen and Kusý, other dissidents who sought to delineate the contours of “civil society” by engaging with history. These are the dissident intellectuals on whom this paper focuses.

In the Czech lands, the Czech dissident philosopher Jan Patočka, the lawyer Petr Pithart, and, on the Slovak side, the dissident historian Ján Mlynárik all addressed questions of Czech history. The distinctive feature of these Czech debates lay in the fact that they situated themselves within the tradition of the “debates on the meaning of Czech history” extending back to the nineteenth century. They subjected Czech history to critical scrutiny and asked why Czechoslovakia had fallen into a “totalitarian” regime.

The philosopher Jan Patočka characterized a conception of the nation grounded in language as “petty Czechness” and contrasted it with the thought of Bernard Bolzano, who had advocated a form of territorial patriotism grounded in moral and universal principles. The lawyer Pithart and the historian Mlynárik argued that the acceptance of collective guilt for the “expulsion of the Germans” had led to the moral decline of Czech society and prepared the ground for the establishment of the socialist regime. In addition, Pithart further criticized the formation of the nation based on nineteenth-century Jungmann-style linguistic nationalism, arguing that it had generated exclusivism and become a remote cause of the expulsion of the Germans.

Taking up these Czech debates on national history, it was Pithart who focused on communities not grounded in language and called for the reconstruction of “civil society.” He proposed the “fatherland(vlast)” as a community “actively created, maintained, and refined” on the basis of a shared sense of responsibility, rather than on language. This “fatherland” suggested the possibility of becoming a political community composed of “citizens” that would encompass not only Czechs, but also Slovaks, minorities, and even those on the side of the regime—that is, all the diverse inhabitants of the country. At the same time, however, Pithart’s argument bore the limitation that it did not clearly articulate a concrete idea by which to integrate the diverse groups of inhabitants—in other words, a founding idea for the existence of the fatherland.

In Slovakia, both writers such as Vladimír Mináč, who, while remaining within the regime, advanced a discourse that was nonetheless critical of it—in this sense, “regime insiders with oppositional tendencies”—and the dissident Kusý developed theories of “civil society” grounded in the nation.

Regime intellectuals evaluated the introduction of the federal system in 1969 as a watershed event that established the Slovak nation as a constituent subject of the state. Mináč argued that the Slovak nation should be brought to completion through its historical development and through the federal system. In his argument, “citizens” effectively meant an ethnic community based on language.

By contrast, the dissident Miroslav Kusý understood the Slovak nation as an “artificial nation” grounded in language. For Kusý, the nation did not exist a priori by virtue of language; its formation and development had to await the industrialization and urbanization of the 1960s. He criticized the Slovak nation for being narrowly fixated on the pursuit of national rights and described this condition as “a slight delay in development.” He went on to argue that a truly mature nation is a community of citizens rooted in civil rights and human rights. At this point, he suggested that, by virtue of having obtained the federal system, the Slovak nation had become capable of taking civil rights and human rights into account and was on the way to becoming a more mature nation. He also interpreted the oppression of the Hungarian minority as a violation of civil rights and sought to depict a vision of “civil society” that would encompass all residents living in Slovakia. Yet Kusý’s theory of “civil society” also had the limitation that, since it presupposed the maturation of the Slovak nation under the federal system, its scope remained restricted to the territory of Slovakia.

As a possible way to overcome the limits of Czech and Slovak theories of “civil society,” this paper focuses on debates that take “Czechoslovakia” itself as their framework. This line of argument was developed by the historian Jan Tesař and Kusý.

Jan Tesař, a signatory of “Charter 77” who later became an émigré intellectual, criticized the abandonment of the idea of the Czechoslovak nation as a “supra-nation.” He argued that this abandonment had paved the way for the advent of the “totalitarian” regime and called for the reconstruction of “civil society” based on the Czechoslovak nation. For him, the founding principle of the Czechoslovak nation was to be found in *humanita*, the idea advanced by T. G. Masaryk. Tesař evaluates Masaryk, first, as having unified the history from the Czech Reformation to the Slovak National Revival under the idea of *humanita*, and second, as a “creator” who established the transhistorical idea of the “Czechoslovak nation.”

Kusý, by contrast, responded to the radical Slovak nationalist claims advanced in the late 1980s by Mináč and others by arguing that the *raison d’être* of the Czechoslovak state lay in the “cultural mutual solidarity” between Czechs and Slovaks that had developed since the nineteenth century. He maintained that Masaryk’s “Czechoslovakism” was imbued with a democratic ideal, and that Czechs and Slovaks ought to coexist on this basis. Kusý called for the granting of autonomy to both republics within the federal system and for the creation of a new common consciousness and termed this “new Czechoslovakism.” This new national consciousness, grounded in mutual solidarity between the two nations within the framework of federalism, had the potential to encompass all citizens.

This paper has clarified that, during the “normalization” period, dissidents sought to construct a “civil society” opposed to the regime through debates on the nation. Tesař’s argument located the idea of “civil society” within the Czechoslovak framework in Masaryk’s *humanita*, but

its view of history may have been unconsciously Czech-centered. Kusý's argument grounded the idea of "civil society" in civil rights and aimed, in principle, to encompass all the inhabitants of the country. At the same time, by focusing on the Czech and Slovak nations as its primary constituent units, his framework harbored the danger of de facto excluding minorities.

These debates articulated the possibility of an alternative community—a "civil society"—that could oppose the regime in the period prior to the dissolution of the federation. Yet their content also shows that, given the historical constraints under which they were elaborated, they did not fully succeed in overcoming the consciousness of exclusion.